

## Articulating Thinking through Writing. A Flusserian Investigation of the Gestures of Academic Writing

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#### **13 SES 03, What Are Universities for and Academic Writing?**

Long Paper & Paper Session

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### Contribution

#### Articulating Thinking through Writing. A Flusserian Investigation of the Gestures of Academic Writing

A student sits alone at her computer writing a text for her Master's thesis. This is a familiar scene occurring in many higher education institutions, but what makes it a university scene? Student's writing at the university has been a rather marginal topic in the philosophy of education. Some exceptions should be noted, such as approaching academic writing as formal training (Fulford, 2009), or the academic literacies approach which sees writing as a kind of socialisation (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2003). However, this presentation asks a more basic question from an educational perspective: What kind of university pedagogy is entailed in the everyday practices of academic writing? By going beyond the prevailing conceptions of academic writing as an individual skill which must be acquired, as a discourse, or of a demonstration of student's understanding of a topic, this paper explores what makes student's writing at the university an educational practice valuable in and for itself.

We imagine the university mostly through collective scenes of gathering, students sitting in a lecture, listening to a professor, discussing a text in a seminar, studying together or working on a project. Some thinkers have argued that this collective aspect makes the university pedagogy specific, insofar as the university's pedagogical form is seen as a way of articulating 'the movement of public study and public thought' (Masschelein, 2013). Masschelein and Simons take the examples of the lecture and the seminar as the 'paradigmatic figures' (Masschelein, 2013) - but not the only ones - of the university's pedagogical form. While it is easier to see how something is 'made public' in a lecture or a seminar, because

there is an actual gathering of students and masters present in the room, hence we know who is becoming a public, it is not clear who and where is the public in the case of academic writing. Where is the university when the student writes alone in her study? What kind of university thinking (if any) is articulated through student's academic writing?

In order to sketch out an answer, I will use the work of Vilém Flusser concerning gestures as articulations of thought as a theoretical framework. According to Flusser, there are no actual thoughts which have not been articulated through gestures. Flusser gives the example of the gesture of painting as the physical articulation of imagination, or the gesture of writing as articulating conceptual thought by 'abstracting lines from surfaces'. Gestures are codifications of thought meant to be intersubjectively deciphered: 'gestures express and articulate that which they symbolically represent' (Flusser, 2014). In other words, there are no private gestures just as there is no private language. This idea opens up the possibility of reading into every human gesture its public dimension and, hence, to understand what kind of public is addressed through a particular gesture. By looking at the gestures involved in academic writing and by applying a Flusserian-inspired phenomenology of gestures to student testimonies, this presentation will articulate a proposal for the kind of thinking involved in academic writing and its educational significance.

## Method

This paper draws on a phenomenology of gestures, as theorised by Vilém Flusser. For Flusser, 'a gesture is a movement of the body or of a tool connected to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation' (Flusser 2014, p. 2) meaning that it is intentional. All gestures are states of mind symbolically encoded in such a way as to be recognisable by members of the same community/ culture.

In order to arrive at the gestures to be analysed, I have interviewed several master students and recent graduates, asking them to describe the process of writing their Master's thesis. In their interviews, the students have provided for a rich description of the gestures involved in academic writing; such gestures are not just the mere typing of the work, but involve an entire constellation of gestures such as searching online for literature, copying, pasting, scrolling through documents, mind-mapping, summarising, highlighting, etc.

The rationale of this method is that, by looking only at gestures and discarding the meanings presented by the interviewees, a picture of the thinking behind the gestures will emerge. Gestures are a way of making visible a way of thinking, by giving it expression and codifying it. However, I am aware that the gestures themselves are not exhausting the meaning of the pedagogical practice, because there are also materialities and spatial configurations involved in the practice of academic writing which will not be discussed here. But the gestures in themselves, without a prior normative framework, will help reveal some of the thinking already embedded in the academic writing.

## Expected Outcomes

The aim of this paper is twofold: first, to define the kinds of thinking enacted in academic writing through a phenomenology of gestures inspired by Flusser's work. The second aim is to give an educational reading of this thinking by tracing the types of public articulated through academic writing, and also by describing what is collective and what is individual in this university practice. By outlining what makes academic writing as an educational practice valuable in itself, I hope to make academic writing a matter of concern for the scholars working in the field of philosophy of education.

## References

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This proposal is part of a master or doctoral thesis.

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